

How we see the world depends on who surrounds us

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As we move through the world in our daily lives, we humans make judgments about ourselves and others, assessing our thoughts and status against what we perceive around us. You may think you're doing far better, or far worse than everyone else. It can seem that everyone sees the world just like you, or the opposite: that your ideas are totally unique.

These social judgments can appear contradictory, but a new Social Sampling Model (SSM), published in *Psychological Review*, suggests they can be explained by a single quantitative theory. The authors—SFI Professor Mirta Galesic, External Professor Henrik Olsson, and Jörg Rieskamp (Professor at University of Basel)—say social judgments depend largely on the composition of people's social circles.

"Our social circles—our friends and family—are often the only sources of information we have about different characteristics of a broader social world, such as frequency of health problems or conflicts with a partner," says Olsson. This means that the same cognitive process will produce different judgments about broader populations depending on people's social circles.

For example, Democrats might think that their views are more prevalent in the general population than Republicans do. However, SSM predicts that this will only occur for people whose friends tend to share their views. For Democrats who have more diverse social circles, the effect can be reversed: they can think that their views are more rare in the

overall population than Republicans do. The authors find evidence for these and other SSM predictions in several empirical studies.

To understand when and why biased social judgments occur, we need to study how individual cognitive processes interact with the structure of social networks. Previous explanations of social judgments have often focused on only one of these aspects of complex social systems.

Galesic gives this analogy: "Consider two chefs who use the same recipe for salsa but with peppers from different regions. Their salsas could end up tasting quite differently. Without recognizing the difference in peppers, one might think that the chefs have used different recipes. Similarly, two people can rely on the same cognitive process to make social judgments about the overall [population](#), but if they rely on different social circles, they could end up with different judgments."

Better understanding the roots of social [judgment](#) has important implications for establishing public policies and for individual decisions. The way we perceive our social worlds will affect how we judge our own situation and how we set our personal goals. It can also affect our beliefs about what public policies (e.g. those aimed at wealth redistribution or reduced immigration) a society needs, say Galesic and Olsson.

More information: Mirta Galesic et al. A sampling model of social judgment., *Psychological Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/rev0000096](https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000096)

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